

Board of Education Regular Meeting  
Suffield Middle School Auditorium  
and via Zoom  
August 23, 2021

Call to Order

Board Chair Davis called the meeting to order at 6:34p.m. The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance.

Present: Board members Jamie Drzyzga, Debra Dudack (via Zoom), Melissa Finnigan, Brian Fry, Glenn Gazdik (via Zoom), Scott Lingenfelter (via Zoom) Susan Mercik Davis, Maureen Sattan; and Superintendent Timothy Van Tasel

Absent: Board member Michael Sepko

Recognition

None

Public Comment

None

Board Member Comment

Board member Dudack thanked everyone for all the work being done to prepare for the new school year as well as the offerings provided to students over the summer.

Reports to the Board

- Superintendent's Report
  - The Superintendent thanked all those who attended the parent conference call last week where the school reopening plan was shared with families.
  - In response to emails received and at the request of a Board member to state the district's position on Critical Race Theory (CRT), the Superintendent stated that CRT is not being taught in Suffield Public Schools. Critical Race Theory and the theoretical framework surrounding it is not something that he feels it is appropriate for PreK-12 students for learning, as it is a higher-level scholarship course. He wants the community to understand that the district's diversity, equity and inclusion work is separate from CRT, and the purpose is to ensure that Suffield Public Schools is a welcoming environment for all students where differences are accepted, and diverse resources are available to students.
  - Schools open next week to full in-person learning. The district will continue to take guidance from health officials and adjust health and safety protocols as necessary. August 27 is New Teacher Orientation and August 30 is Convocation. September 1 is the first day of school for students and he welcomed all families. The Superintendent thanked faculty and staff for their work over the summer as well as the Board of Education for their ongoing support.
- Board Chair's Report
  - Board Chair Mercik Davis said the Board is trying to optimize the audio and visual integrity of Board meetings to allow for hybrid meetings. Other venues did not work for various reasons so for now Board meetings will remain in the middle school auditorium.

- She stated the parent conference call went well with over 400 attendees. The mask requirement is mandated through at least September 30 per the Governor's executive order.
- She reiterated the Suffield Public School is not teaching Critical Race Theory and does not have it in its curriculum. She noted that Black and Latino studies must be offered by Connecticut high schools in 2022-2023 per the State Board of Education; however, there is no requirement that students take the course.
- The summer programming was a success and she thanked the teachers and staff who were involved.
- Board Chair Mercik Davis welcomed students, families and staff back to school.
- She thanked Board members for their feedback related to the optimal number of Board members serving on the Board of Education, which is under review by the town's Charter Revision Commission.
- **Business Manager's Report**
  - Mr. Hoff said no financial report is being given as it is the beginning of the fiscal year and there are no expenditures to date. A report will be given at the September meeting.
  - He is working on the State financial report which is due September 3.
  - Mr. Hoff thanked the Facilities and Technology staff for the work done over the summer.
  - Tim Malley, the new Food Service Director, began last week in the District.
  - M&J had their start up meeting today. Masks will be required on buses and windows will be open for ventilation. Bus routes will be posted on the website this week.
- **Board of Selectmen's Report**
  - No report
- **Board of Finance Liaison's Report**
  - No report

#### Approval of Minutes

**MOTION #22-06:** Gazdik moved to approve the Board of Education meeting minutes of July 22, 2021. Drzyzga seconded the motion. All members voted in favor except Lingenfelter, who abstained. The motion passed **7-0-1**.

#### Consent Agenda

None

#### Discussion/Action Items

- **COVID-19 Update on Reopening of Schools**

The Superintendent said the health and safety protocols and the Safe Return to In-Person Instruction and Continuity of Learning Plan are posted on the district website. A district communication will be sent to families this week with a link to this information. The Superintendent said the district will continue to update families, the Board of Education and the community on any changes in health guidance and protocols. He is confident of opening a safe environment for students and staff this year. The Superintendent said the Governor has issued a vaccination requirement for all school staff and he thanked Ms. Carney, Mr. Hoff and Dr. Kelley for their efforts in the operational work that is needed to comply with this mandate. The Superintendent held a district-wide staff meeting today to inform staff of the mandate and the documentation that will be required of all staff. There are two exemptions allowed under this mandate: medical and religious, and more information about the exemptions is expected from the State. Two vaccination clinics are scheduled at Suffield Middle School on the evenings of September 1 and September 22 for eligible students, staff and the community. In response to Board members' questions relative to site testing, enforcement of the mask mandate, potential for a vaccine mandate for students, and a concern about the vaccination

mandate for school employees, the Superintendent stated that he is still awaiting information from the state on site testing. He said parents were supportive of students wearing masks last year, so he is hopeful that will be the case again this year. The Superintendent stated that he does not have any indication that the State will be imposing a vaccine mandate for students. As it relates to the employee mandate, the Superintendent said the administration has an obligation to fulfill a state mandate and there are negative implications for not doing so. A Board member stated local Boards of Education are supposed to set policies for schools, not the Governor.

- Discussion and Possible Action on ESSER Fund Proposals

Mr. Hoff reviewed the ESSER grant funds. There are a few changes since the last time the Board reviewed the proposed use of each funds, which include removing funding of interactive read-alouds through the ESSER funds, funding the replacement of all water fountains in the district with bottle fillers, and additional temporary staffing for supporting students who may be quarantined and/or for academic recovery. In response to a Board member's question about how other districts are spending the grant money, many are using the funds for additional staffing for academic recovery and facilities projects. The ARP ESSER funds do not have to be expended until September 2024, and these reports will be coming back to the Board for approval when changes are made.

**MOTION #22-07:** Sattan moved to approve the ESSER funds proposal as presented. Fry seconded the motion. All members voted in favor. The motion passed **8-0-0**.

- Discussion and Possible Action on High School Courtyard Project

The Superintendent said the high school courtyard needs significant work to be used as a learning area for students. The proposed design includes creating outdoor classroom space, multifunctional spaces, and low maintenance plantings and hardscapes. Students' input for design ideas and their involvement in creating the space is being sought. Ms. Zawawi has contacted the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to assist with funding sources. She has also reached out to the Suffield Foundation for Excellent Schools. The estimate for renovating the space is approximately \$40,000. The cost of the project, fundraising and additional grant funding sources, and the academic and social emotional advantages of this space for students was discussed.

**MOTION #22-08:** Drzyzga moved to approve a \$40,000 renovation project for the High School Courtyard Project. Finnigan seconded the motion. Finnigan, Fry, Drzyzga, Gazdik, Dudack and Mercik Davis voted in favor. Sattan and Lingenfelter voted against. The motion passed **6-2-0**.

- Discussion and Possible Action on Board of Education 2021-2022 Goals

Board Chair Mercik Davis said the Board adopted the current goals last year and asked if Board members had any changes or additions to the goals for the 2021-2022 school year. A Board member would like to add a targeted goal to improve student achievement. A Board member said the current goals should read "continue to..." as these goals are not new but ongoing.

**MOTION #22-09:** Sattan moved to approve the 2021-2022 goals, with the exception of adding the phrase, "Continue to" at the beginning of each goal, and revise Goal #2 to read, "Continue to drive student achievement and outcomes by systematically using meaningful data to track student success and instructional practices." Finnigan seconded the motion and all members voted in favor. The motion passed **8-0-0**.

#### Subcommittee Reports

None

### Board Liaison Reports

- CREC – Nothing to report
- Agriscience – Nothing to report
- CABA – CABA/CAPSS convention is on Friday, November 12 in Groton, CT.

### Future Business

Board member Lingenfelter asked for a discussion item to be added to a future meeting relative to the Board engaging its legal counsel to challenge the Governor's mandates. Board Chair Mercik Davis said it can be added to the September 7 Board meeting. Dr. Van Tassel confirmed that his CRT statement was in response to Board Member Sepko's future business request to clarify district intent and some public inquiries he had received. Board Chair Mercik Davis had spoken to Board Member Sepko, who wanted a statement, and it could be re-added as a future discussion item if requested.

### Public Comment

None

### Board Member Comment

Board member Finnigan said Mr. Zenczak started last week and she is excited to have him in Suffield.

Board member Fry encouraged all to get vaccinated. He asked that future COVID-19 vaccine tracking protocols not rely on the honor system but to clearly identify those who have been vaccinated versus those who have not. He also wants integrity in tracking quarantines and enforcing mask mandates.

Board member Lingenfelter reiterated his earlier comments about concerns relative to the vaccine mandate for school staff, potentially future vaccine mandates for students, and the mask mandates being ordered by the Governor, and that decisions are not being made at the local level. He is also concerned about our duty of care towards our students and staff with respect to their personal liberties and freedoms with forcing these mandates on them.

Board member Mercik Davis said as we approach the new school year, she hopes everyone speaks freely and be respectful of one another's positions on issues as we continue to deal with issues relative to the pandemic. She believes the Board does a good job at that and thanked the Board for their example.

### Adjournment

Drzyzga moved, Sattan seconded to adjourn the meeting at 8:39 p.m. All members voted in favor.

Click here to view the meeting:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MW4tx4AJYIJE8QGwvRYxU088wAx3ppD6/view?usp=sharing>

*Minutes are subject to approval at the regular meeting of September 7, 2021.*

Respectfully submitted,

Maureen Sattan  
Secretary